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ABSTRACT

A course in post-Civil War U. S. history was offered through a local newspaper during the fall semester of 1973. One instructional unit was presented each week for 13 weeks in the newspaper, and the final exam was offered on campus. Weekly units included behavioral objectives, historical interpretation, self-tests, and bibliographies. The mid-term was given in the newspaper as one of the units. The exam was returned to the college for scoring, but the grade did not affect the student's course grade. Those who passed the final exam were given three hours of undergraduate credit in U. S. history. Optional open-discussion forums were held on campus during the course, and the instructor was available for conferences twice a week. A course evaluation form was included in the last newspaper unit. A followup questionnaire will be sent in September of 1974 to those who completed the course. By the night of the final exam, 130 people had paid the course tuition fee; 118 took the final exam and 115 passed it. Evaluation questionnaires revealed that 63 percent of those who finished the course were women, over 50 percent of whom were over 30 years old. Over half indicated that an important reason for taking the course was their inability to attend classes on campus. (KM)

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THE NEWSPAPER: A VEHICLE FOR DELIVERY OF COLLEGE COURSES

JC 740 092

by

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In the fall semester of 1973, Moraine Valley Community College (Palos Hills, Ill.), with the cooperation of the Suburban Economist, a local community newspaper with a circulation of 150,000, offered a U.S. history course (1865 to the Present) through the newspaper. With this experimental delivery system, Moraine was attempting to provide post-secondary education for a large segment of non-students in the college district.

(Non-students were defined as young students or adults who had not previously experienced higher education because of lack of time, working commitments, or just "fear" of college.)

It was hoped the newspaper be a familiar medium which would provide the student with convenience and would remove the pressure of assimilating college material. The college expected that the newspaper course would attract about 200 non-students and that at least 30 of them would attend a traditional class on the Moraine campus at some later date.

COURSE ORGANIZATION

The newspaper project was conceived by MVCC President Robert E. Turner in September of 1972 and was organized by this writer in the spring of 1973. A series of meetings was held with the newspaper to finalize the format and content of the course. The newspaper was receptive to the innovative project. Preparation of course materials and dissemination of publicity began in June and continued throughout the summer. The first unit was published the second week of September.

Salient features of the course included:

- Individualized Method--The course lasted 14 weeks. One instructional unit was presented each week for 13 weeks, and the final exam was conducted on the Moraine campus. Each reader was able to work at his own pace by following the weekly units, which included rational behavioral objectives, historical interpretation, self tests and bibliographies. The newspaper format provided the reader with a permanent record of his lessons, which he could review at his convenience.

- Course Content and Approach--Each weekly unit examined one post-Civil War problem, eventually covering the span from 1865 to the present. The interpretive approach to history was emphasized. The reader was presented conflicting views on historical problems and left to form his own conclusion.

- Exams--Each weekly newspaper unit contained an optional, objective self-test which afforded the reader an opportunity to check his comprehension of the material in the paper. The self-tests were administered and scored by the reader as he finished each unit.

  Two exams were given, mid-term and final. The mid-term was printed in the newspaper as one of the weekly units. This exam was taken by the reader at home and returned to the college for scoring. The score on this exam did not affect the student's course grade. The test was used as an instrument for the student to check his progress.

- Course Credit--The reader who passed the final exam earned three hours of undergraduate credit in U.S. history. The reader was not required to register for the course until three weeks before he took the final exam.

- Open Discussion Forums--During the 14-week course optional open-discussion forums were held on the Moraine campus. These sessions gave serious readers a chance to interact with their colleagues and the instructor.

- Telephone Hot Line--The instructor was available for telephone or personal conferences on the Moraine Valley Community College campus twice each week. This service provided immediate feedback to the reader and encouraged him to continue his studies.

- Evaluation--A course evaluation forum included in the last newspaper unit gave the student an opportunity to comment on the course. In September of 1974, a follow-up questionnaire will be sent to those who completed the newspaper course in December of 1973. This questionnaire will attempt to determine if any of them are continuing their college education.

COURSE RESPONSE

With the pre-course publicity, the newspaper printed a pre-registration form to determine how many would be interested in taking the newspaper history course. The initial response was overwhelming--700 pre-registration forms and about 200 phone inquiries. Because the newspaper's circulation extended to a large area outside the Moraine college district, many did not take the course because they would be required to pay the out-of-district tuition rate. (In-district tuition was $10 per credit hour, and out-of-district was $50 per credit hour.)

Beginning with the printing of the first weekly unit in September and periodically throughout the remainder of the course, an official college registration form was included in the newspaper. By the end of the registration period (Dec. 3, 1973), 221 had signed up for the course. By the night of the final exam (Dec. 20, 1973), 130 had paid the course tuition fee. Of this latter group, 118 took the final exam, and 115 passed. Twelve who paid the tuition fee did not take the final exam. Why? Telephone calls are being made to determine the reason they did not finish the course.

EVALUATION

The course was evaluated through a questionnaire printed with the last newspaper unit. Ninety-seven evaluation forms were returned and were computer scored.

The evaluation showed that 63 percent of those who finished the course were women and that over 50 percent of the enrollment was over 30 years of age. Over 50% indicated that an important reason for their taking the newspaper course was their inability to attend classes on campus. These statistics support the conclusion that the newspaper provided a convenient system for delivering instruction to what MVCC classified as the typical non-student.

The questionnaire results also indicated that those who enrolled are interested in continuing their education. Sixty-five percent reported that the transferability of the newspaper course influenced them to take the course. Seventy-four percent said they planned to attend college now or at some future date. Of these, 35 percent indicated that they would attend classes this spring at Moraine Valley Community College. If this figure is accurate, the newspaper course achieved its secondary goal: bringing at least one full class (30) into a traditional college class. A follow-up questionnaire will be distributed in the fall of 1974 to determine how many in the newspaper course are continuing their college education and what effect the newspaper course had on their decision.

The readers indicated that they liked the self-paced, behavioral-objective approach to learning. As one reader stated, "This is the kind of adult education I like--on my own time and at my own convenience."

The telephone hot line and open discussion forums, which were provided to afford the reader the opportunity to communicate with his colleagues and instructor, were scarcely used. (I received about two phone calls a week, and an average of about 45 attended each discussion session.)

The readability of the weekly articles ranked extremely high. Ninety-three percent of the readers rated the course materials as excellent or good. Perhaps the self-paced course format and the easy readability of the articles decreased the reader's need for the telephone hot line and campus discussion forums. Perhaps many of the readers lacked transportation to the campus.

On the other hand, a home delivery system like the one offered by the newspaper may help to maintain enrollment in college courses during a continuing energy crisis.

Of the readers who filled out the questionnaire, 94% indicated that they definitely or probably would take another newspaper course. Only three percent said they definitely would not take another newspaper course.

Those who took the course represented 18 communities. About 50% of the enrollees had never attended Moraine Valley Community College. This indicates that the newspaper can be used to attract new students. As one reader stated, "I think it is a great innovation to education. I would have taken any course that was presented, and I know (newspaper courses) will reach many people who are unable to attend school, whatever their reason."

CONCLUSIONS

This experiment was successful because it:

- reached a large segment of the community never before served by the college
- demonstrated that a newspaper can be a viable delivery system for a college course
- showed that a newspaper can be an effective method for providing non-students with post-secondary educational experience
- allowed Moraine Valley Community College to fulfill one of its major objectives, namely, to bring education to the community
- provided valuable publicity for the college

Moraine hopes to implement this delivery system on a regular basis by offering another course through the paper each semester. However, several questions that must be answered before attempting to use this media:

- are costs for printing and advertising a newspaper course prohibitive? (Moraine was fortunate to have the newspaper donate the space for the first course)
- how will the instructor be compensated for developing and implementing the course?
- will the course offered in the newspaper draw students from the same course offered in the traditional classroom?
- is the circulation of the newspaper offering the course wide enough to cover the college district?
- is the admissions and business office set up to handle late registration and deferred tuition payments?

Some questions pertinent to course materials are:

- does the course offered lend itself to a newspaper format? Is it suited to self-pacing and individualized study? Is it readable?

- is an open communications line operating between newspaper and college for coordinating printing and organizing of course materials?
- what provision is made for students taking a college course for the first time? Is an optional how-to-study or how-to-take-an-exam session offered?
- are alternative methods, such as exams and papers, available for measuring a student's understanding of course materials?
- will a supplementary study kit help a student assimilate newspaper lessons or enrich course material?
- are testing and discussion sessions on campus flexible enough to accommodate newspaper readers with rigid learning sets?
- are adequate supportive services (clerical help, editing services, computerized tests) available to assist the instructor in implementing the newspaper course?

These are some of the problems confronting a college which attempts to experiment with this new educational delivery system. However, I believe that the newspaper can be a vehicle for bolstering sagging college enrollments. This medium enables the college to reach the people and become relevant to the community.

Every college has problems, and each must use the resources available to solve them. Some colleges may find that the newspaper is a medium which can be used as an effective vehicle for delivering instruction to large numbers of people at a relatively low cost.

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